

# **Ambitious railway faces hurdles**

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**SANTA CLARITA** - An ambitious plan to re-establish a passenger-rail line between Santa Clarita and the Ventura coast faces serious hurdles, although all sides agree an alternative is needed to the region's increasingly congested freeways.

A draft study commissioned in part by the Ventura County Transportation Commission recommends extending the existing east-west Santa Paula Line to the north-south railroad that runs through Santa Clarita. There, planners hope to reclaim an abandoned rail corridor through the city's commercial and business hub.

"The most important thing is that we think about it and do some long-range planning so maybe in 30 years, if we start reserving the right-of-way now, we can do something," said Kerry Forsythe, the commission's deputy director.

For several months, commission executives have been talking up their plan with the various stakeholders to collect comments before delivering the results in October to the full panel.

The proposal got a lukewarm reception during a recent session with the Santa Clarita City Council, which objected to the route through the city's densely developed town center area.

"It's irrational," Councilwoman Laurene Weste said. "I support rail travel, but to wipe out a life-style, to literally impact hundreds of millions of dollars of real estate, I can't see it working."

Still the city where commuters face a gridlocked Interstate 5 heading south to jobs joins Ventura County in its quest to study a new passenger rail spur to connect with its existing Metrolink line.

"Santa Clarita has some very important issues," said Bob Huddy, the transportation program manager for the Southern California Association of Governments. "When you put a new line in, it's a difficult proposition. Where does the alignment go ... the grade crossings?"

"Those are large issues that have to be overcome."

But what's at stake is far too important to drop because it's difficult to map an alignment, Huddy said. The rail line could carry up to 7,000 commuters a day who otherwise would head south through the Newhall Pass to the San Fernando Valley.

The line also would bolster commuter service to Ventura and Oxnard where jobs are plentiful but affordable housing scarce, said Mark Schneipp, chief economist of the California Economic Forecast at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

"You have a serious housing problem in Ventura County," Schneipp said. "We're looking at Santa Clarita to fill jobs in Ventura and Oxnard."

There's also some 60,000 homes planned in the greater region - including the 21,000-home Newhall Ranch project, an even larger development near Gorman and smaller developments in Fillmore and Santa Paula, Schneipp said. Most of those residents will have to travel one way or the other to job centers.

\$450 million project

The 211-page draft study, financed by the state Department of Transportation, urges preservation and maintenance of the right-of-way and plans for an extended rail.

The plan is to create a 52-mile corridor at an estimated cost of up to \$450 million in 2005 dollars. That amounts to some \$7.2 million per mile, said Ginger Gherardi, the VCTC's executive director.

Union Pacific currently operates three weekly round-trip freight trains on the line from Port Hueneme to Santa Paula.

Metrolink's Ventura County Line offers weekday commuter service from Ventura to Union Station in Los Angeles. Amtrak carries passengers through Ventura, another potential link that could entice Santa Clarita.

And in Fillmore, the Fillmore and Western Railway runs recreational excursion trains - a murder-mystery series and holiday trips to a pumpkin patch and cut-your-own Christmas tree farm. That portion of the rail also is used frequently for filming.

The tracks now cross the farmland of Ventura County and roughly follow the bucolic Santa Clara River Valley. The VCTC has money this year to rebuild the line through Piru to the Ventura County line, where The Newhall Land and Farming Co. must reserve a 35-foot rail corridor through its Newhall Ranch project.

The main complication lies in extending tracks east across Interstate 5 and rebuilding a long-abandoned rail line through Santa Clarita to the city's main Metrolink station.

Weste suggested ending the line west of Santa Clarita - perhaps near Newhall Ranch - then using shuttles to transport passengers to the Metrolink station.

An elevated train "like a Disneyland tram" might also be a possibility, though extremely expensive, Councilman Frank Ferry said.

The refurbished line would be highlighted by a historic station in Saticoy - now used as a lumber yard - and a century-old rail bridge that was salvaged and returned to Piru by the late Scott Newhall.

Once rehabilitated and extended, stops are planned in Oxnard, Ventura, the farm town of Saticoy, Santa Paula, Fillmore, Piru, Newhall Ranch and Valencia's mall before reaching the Santa Clarita station.

### **Freight is an issue**

Whether the rail line would carry freight trains is a sticking point. Santa Clarita, Los Angeles County and Newhall Land oppose running freight along their stretch of the line.

"No freight," Councilman Frank Ferry said. "You can't have freight going by the mall, through the center of town."

Restricting freight would be within the rights of the city or county jurisdiction, Forsythe said.

The report does peg the rail as suitable for up to three daily freight runs from Port Hueneme to Santa Clarita, but Forsythe said the focus will be on passenger service.

The final report, he said, will put less emphasis on freight.

Yet much of the federal funding identified in the draft study would require the tracks be used for freight, a move Los Angeles County is eyeing carefully, said Michael Cano, transportation deputy for Supervisor Michael Antonovich.

"We support looking at the idea of a commuter-only rail on this line, but we're very wary of usage of this line for freight or entwining this project with any financial commitments that would open the door for freight," Cano said.

To fund acquisitions, development and maintenance, the study identified dozens of potential revenue sources, primarily federal, state and regional transportation money. It even included some unusual possibilities ranging from Defense Department funding should the line be used by the military and private naming rights for the system, its stations and individual cars.

SCAG and the VCTC say the pros of system are multiple and center on planning to efficiently move an influx of commuters, travelers and possibly freight, Forsythe said.

In northwestern Los Angeles County, some 50,000 more homes - including Newhall Ranch - are planned, but no real solutions exist to ease traffic.

"Over time, once you get that corridor on a map, you can make decisions," Forsythe said.  
"We need to look at what's there today and maintain that, then look at what we can do to make this work."